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ABSTRACT

This ERIC Digest delineates problems posed by the increasing number of language-minority children in schools and offers suggestions for teaching children from different cultures. It is maintained that a group's language reflects its culture, and the uses to which that language is put are culturally determined. When children and adults do not share common experiences and beliefs, adults are less able to help children encode their thoughts in language. To overcome problems of the multicultural classroom, teachers need to learn to recognize developmentally equivalent patterns of behavior across cultures. They should not value some ways of achieving developmental milestones more highly than others. Teachers need to begin instruction with interactive styles and content that is familiar to the children. Whether this entails speaking in the child's primary language, using culturally appropriate styles of address, or relying on patterns of management familiar to the children, the purpose is to establish a basis for communication. One of the most important tasks for teachers is interpreting the school's agenda to parents. When differences exist between the cultural patterns of the home and community and those of the school, teachers must deal with the differences directly. Formal assessment of learning outcomes should be delayed until teachers and children have built a set of shared meanings. (RH)

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Educating Language-Minority Children

Barbara T. Bowman

Why can't all Americans just speak standard English? This plaintive question reflects the distress many citizens feel about the linguistic diversity in the schools. In many school districts, languages of Central and South America, Africa, and Asia mix with American dialects, creating classrooms in which communication is difficult. Across America, children are not learning essential lessons in school. In the next decade or two, the problem will become even more serious. Language-minority children will become the majority in public schools, seriously straining the capacity of those institutions.

In a nation increasingly composed of people who speak different languages and dialects, the old notion of melting them together through the use of a common language is once again attractive. Requiring all children to speak the same language at a high level of proficiency would make the task of educating them a good deal easier. Unfortunately, what seems quite good in theory is often difficult to put into practice. In this instance, the interrelationship of culture, language, and the children's development may make a common language difficult to obtain.

Culture, Language and Development

Differences in the ways groups think and act are more than a matter of using different words or performing different actions for the same purposes. Differences in cultures are more substantial than whether members of a community eat white bread, corn pone, or tortillas. The behavior of people varies, and the beliefs, values, and assumptions that underlie behavior differ as well. Culture influences both behavior and the psychological processes on which it rests. Culture forms a prism through which members of a group see the world and create shared meanings. And a group's culture is reflected by the group's language.

Child development follows a pattern similar to that of culture. Major structural changes in children, such as language learning, arise from the interaction of biology and experience. Such changes are remarkably similar in kind and sequence among cultural groups. But the knowledge and skills—the cultural learning—the child acquires at various ages depend on the child's family and community.

Learning a primary language is a developmental milestone and a developmentally appropriate educational objective. However, the uses to which that language is put are determined by the culture. As the ideas from a child's social world are brought to bear through the guidance of the older members of the community, children come to share meanings with their elders.

Classroom discourse presents children with the challenge of learning new rules for communication. The use of formal language, teacher control of verbal exchanges, question-and-answer formats, and references to increasingly abstract ideas characterize the classroom environment, with which many children are unfamiliar. To the extent that these new rules overlap with those that children have already learned, classroom communication is made easier. But children whose past experience with language is not congruent with the new rules will have to learn ways to make meaning all over again before they can use language to learn in the classroom.

When teachers and students come from different cultures or use different languages or dialects, teachers may be unaware of variations between their understanding of a context and their students'; between their expectations for behavior and the children's inclinations. When children and adults do not share common experiences and beliefs, adults are less able to help children encode their thoughts in language.

Teaching Children from Different Cultures

Teachers facing the challenge of teaching children from different cultural communities are hard-pressed to decide what constitutes an appropriate curriculum. If children from some groups are hesitant to speak up in school, how can teachers organize expressive language experiences? If children from some groups are dependent on nonverbal cues for meaning, how can teachers stress word meaning? How can teachers test for mastery of the curriculum if children do not speak a standard language or use the same styles of communication? Cultural diversity makes it hard for teachers to assess each child's developmental status, find common educational experiences to promote growth, and measure the achievement of educational objectives.

Given the complex interaction between culture and development, is it possible to design a developmentally appropriate curriculum? If that question implies that the same curriculum can be used for all children, the answer must be *no*. However, the following developmental prin-

ciples can provide a conceptual framework for teachers trying to bridge the gap between children's cultural backgrounds and school objectives.

Guidelines for Teachers

First, teachers need to learn to recognize developmentally equivalent patterns of behavior. Before children come to school, they have all learned many of the same things, such as a primary language and communication styles. Although these developmental accomplishments may look different, they are developmentally equivalent. When a child does not respond to the social and cognitive expectations of the school, the teacher should look for a developmentally equivalent task to which the child will respond. A child who does not separate buttons correctly can be asked to sort car logos or other personally relevant artifacts. A child who does not listen to stories about the seasons may be spellbound by a story about an ice skater. Teachers with doubts about the development of culturally different children should assume that the children are normal and look at them again, recognizing that their own vision may be clouded by cultural myopia.

Second, it is essential not to value some ways of achieving developmental milestones more highly than others. Asa Hilliard and Mona Vaughn-Scott point out that because the behavior of African-American children is so different from that of their white peers, African-American children are often judged to be deficient, rather than different, in their development. Young children who speak languages other than English, or who speak nonstandard dialects, are often reluctant to give up this connection to their group. When such children find that the way they talk is not understood or appreciated in school, they are apt to become confused or disengaged. And their rejection by the school presages their rejection of school.

Third, teachers need to begin instruction with interactive styles and content that is familiar to the children. Whether this entails speaking in the child's primary language, using culturally appropriate styles of address, or relying on patterns of management familiar to the children, the purpose is to establish a basis for communication. While fluency in a child's primary language may not be possible for many teachers, they can nonetheless become more adept at planning and implementing a culturally sensitive curriculum. Such a curriculum encompasses more than tasting parties, ethnic costumes, and shopworn introductions to practices of people from different nations or racial groups. In order to teach such a curriculum, teachers must come to grips with their own ethnocentricity.

Fourth, school learning is most likely to occur when family values reinforce school expectations. Parents and other community members must view school achievement as a desirable and attainable goal if children are to build it into their sense of self. Interpreting the school's agenda for parents is one of the most important tasks for teachers.

Fifth, when differences exist between the cultural patterns of the home and community and those of the school, teachers must deal with these discrepancies directly. Teachers and children must create shared understandings and new contexts that give meaning to the knowledge and skills being taught. Learning mediated by teachers who are affectionate, interested, and responsive has greater sticking power than learning mediated by an adult who is perceived as impersonal and distant.

Sixth, for children from different racial and ethnic groups, meanings of words, gestures, and actions may differ. Assessment of learning outcomes presents a formidable problem when children misunderstand the teacher's requests for information or demonstrations of knowledge and skills. Formal assessment should be delayed until teachers and children have built a set of new meanings.

A developmentally appropriate curriculum can never be standardized in a multicultural community. But thoughtful teachers can use principles of child development to make the new context of school meaningful and to safeguard the self-confidence of children.

This digest was adapted from the article *Educating Language-Minority Children: Challenges and Opportunities*, which appeared in the October, 1989 issue of *Phi Delta Kappan*, copyright 1989.

For More Information

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